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The language of leaving: Brexit, the second world war and cultural trauma

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the language use in the Brexit debate, especially by the leading figures who argued for Leave. I argue that historically those who identify as English have had anxieties focused around invasion, occupation and loss of sovereignty. In 1940 these fears materialised in the possibility of invasion by Hitler's forces. The unresolved cultural trauma associated with these fears has meant that discussions about the United Kingdom's presence in the European Union have tended to framed in language referring to World War 2 where the European Union's impact on the United Kingdom is rhetorically constructed in the emotive terms of Nazi invasion, occupation and loss of sovereignty.

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The British government held a referendum in June 2016 across the United Kingdom and Gibraltar to gauge whether the population wanted to stay in the European Union or withdraw from membership. The referendum was advisory and non-binding. To the surprise of many the vote to leave narrowly won. YouGov, for example, a polling organisation, on a weighted survey of 3766 voters on the day before the vote, predicted a victory for those wishing to remain in the European Union by a margin of two percent. Other polls before the referendum vote were split as to the outcome (Financial Times, 2016). In the end a majority of those who voted wanted the United Kingdom to leave. Even though the referendum was advisory the prime minister, David Cameron, who had campaigned for the United Kingdom to stay in the European Union, immediately resigned. Theresa May became prime minister in July 2016 and invoked Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union on 29 March 2017, triggering the process for the United Kingdom and Gibraltar to exit the European Union. The subsequent negotiations of the terms of leaving proved so fraught that even though Article 50 makes provision for a lead time of two years before an inevitable exit, the British government has asked for two extensions now finishing on 31 October 2019.

There are many reasons why the Leave vote won. I am concerned here with a deep, underlying cause. I am arguing that the key elements of the English, and I use that term advisedly, cultural imaginary have historically always resulted in an antipathy to integration with the continent of Europe. The interconnected elements I have in mind are invasion, occupation and sovereignty. These have been present for a long time but coalesced in the early years of the 20th century when the assumptions that inform them

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became a part of the national school curriculum. Invasion was, and still is, almost always thought of as being seaborne and has been troped since the 1950s in the rhetoric of immigration which has taken on the supplementary connections with occupation and loss of sovereignty. The psychological impact of World War II on the United Kingdom was experienced through the prism of these terms.

Jeffrey Alexander (p. 15) has developed the idea of cultural trauma. He argues that, 'trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity.' Alexander suggests this happens with a degree of awareness, that cultural trauma is a social construction. Comparing the individual experience with that of the collective, (Alexander, 2016, p. 14) writes that: 'For collectivities it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and working through, it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there.' Contra Alexander I am suggesting that cultural trauma can function similarly to individual trauma, that the traumatised person, or collectivity, may not realise their trauma. In distinction to Alexander's theorisation of cultural trauma as a social construction, it can be thought of as a cultural construction. The cultural trauma that resulted from the fears evoked by Hitler's desire to invade and occupy the United Kingdom with the consequent loss of sovereignty, in the same way as the Nazis had invaded and occupied the countries of mainland Europe, still haunts those who identify as English. Consequently, Hitler and the Nazi project became a touchstone in the debates about Brexit both before and after the referendum. That collectivity, the English, are not aware of their collective trauma stemming from the threat of Nazi invasion and the affect is repeated in new situations.

I shall discuss the relevance of the theorisation of cultural trauma and its application to the English experience of the Second World War in more detail later in the article. In the first part of this article I will elaborate on the English construction of the triad of invasion, occupation and loss of sovereignty. It was these that gained a new affect with the traumatisation caused by the fears engendered by the possibility of invasion, occupation and loss of sovereignty being realised in 1940. I shall discuss the impact of this traumatisation in the second half of the article. To do this I shall utilise various texts including the celebrated English sitcoms *Dad's Army* and *Fawlty Towers*, the detective series *Midsomer Murders* and Christopher Nolan's film *Dunkirk*. All these might be described as narratives that express trauma in that in different ways they exhibit symptoms of the cultural trauma that pervades post-Second World War England.

I have used the term 'Nazis'. In the British cultural imaginary Germans have been linked with the threat of invasion since the latter years of the nineteenth century, around the 1870s after German unification into a single nation-state. It was at this time that Germany replaced France as the country thought most likely to invade the United Kingdom. Nazi is a contraction of *Nationalsozialismus* which translates as National Socialism and was the ideology of the National Socialist political party led by Hitler. However, in British rhetoric the Second World War was fought by Nazis not Germans, and all Germans were Nazis. It was Nazis who threatened to invade, and here is another term which will be interrogated shortly, 'England'. Alexander (2012, p. 43) has argued that, 'Nazism marked a traumatic epoch in modern history.' It is the term Nazi, rather than German, that carries the traumatic heft that became linked with invasion, occupation and loss of sovereignty. Chellow (2014, p. 4), in an undergraduate thesis on the representation of Germany and Germans on British television,

notes that,

> as Europe dealt with the weight of memory left behind by the Second World War, it was apparent that the events between 1939–1945 became a prominent feature of the British psyche. Since 1945 Anglo-German relations have for the most part been civil on the political platform, yet on a broader scale perceptions of Germany have been dominated by images of the Second World War and Germany's Nazi past.

The term Nazi continues to evoke fear and anxiety for Britons, and the English in particular.

Brexit

Before developing this argument further we must return to the 2016 Brexit referendum and look more closely at the results of the voting. Overall 51.9 percent voted Leave while 48.1 percent voted Remain. The vote, as usual with voting in the United Kingdom, was not compulsory. The turnout was 78.1 percent of those entitled to vote. Since the end of the Second World War the voting turnout in general elections had been declining up to the 2000s. In 2001 turnout reached a low of 59.4 percent. The 2017 turnout of 68.7 percent, after the referendum vote and during the seemingly interminable negotiations, was the highest figure since 1997. It is clear that the decision on whether or not to leave the European Union had reengaged the general population.

It is worth comparing the voter turnout in the 2016 referendum with that in the 1975 referendum for whether to stay in or leave what was then the Common Market into which Edward Heath and his government had taken the United Kingdom from the beginning of 1973. Then the total voting figure was 64 percent with 67 percent of those who voted voting to stay in the Common Market. These figures tell us that the general mood was much clearer cut in 1975 and of those entitled to vote many appear to have decided that with the result so seemingly inevitable there was either no need or no point in voting. All national newspapers except *The Spectator* and *The Morning Star* sided with staying in the Common Market. We shall look at why there was such a preponderance of people voting to stay in the Conclusion. In 2016 the United Kingdom population was very much more divided.

However, this division is not the whole story. When broken down by the constituent parts of the United Kingdom we find that in England 53.4 percent voted to leave with 46.6 percent voting Remain. In Wales 52.5 percent voted Leave and 47.5 percent voted Remain. Wales was occupied by the English and became a principality of the English crown in 1284. It was formally annexed to England in the sixteenth century. Over time English preoccupations have seeped into Welsh thinking while many English people have moved across the border. In 1979 in a referendum to ascertain support for a devolved Welsh Assembly the vote against was 79.4 percent. In the 1997 referendum those who voted in favour of a Welsh National Assembly won by 0.6 percent or 6,721 votes out of 1,116,116 votes cast. When the Brexit referendum voting figures for Wales are broken down more, those areas furthest from England and bordering the Irish Sea predominantly voted Remain.

In Scotland, which entered into a Union with England in 1603 when James VI of Scotland became James I of England, 62 percent voted Remain with 38 percent voting Leave. It was the Acts of Union, one passed by the English parliament in 1706 and the other passed by the Scottish parliament in 1707, which formally united England, including Wales, and Scotland as one country to be called Great Britain. All this is to say that

Scotland has always seen itself as distinct from England. This was reaffirmed by the legislated formation of a parliament for Scotland in 1999, a part of British governmental devolution, as an outcome of a referendum in 1997 in which 74.29 percent of Scottish voters voted in favour. In 2014 a referendum on full Scottish independence resulted in 45 percent of voters expressing a wish for independence. What we can see here is the extent to which English preoccupations and anxieties about the European Union were not experienced by those who saw themselves as Scottish.

Northern Ireland also voted Remain by 55.8 percent to 44.2 percent Leave. The Northern Irish vote would have been very much influenced by the concern over what would happen to the border with Ireland if the United Kingdom left the European Union, whether it might become a 'hard' border with customs posts and restrictions on cross-border travel. However, the vote would also have been influenced by the long and complex history of English colonisation of Ireland and the further complexity of Scottish migration to what is now called Northern Ireland. It should be remembered that the full name of the United Kingdom is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, a name formalised in 1927 after the establishment of the Irish Free State In 1922.

I have indicated that in many discussions about the United Kingdom, the term 'England' is often substituted, subsuming the other national entities. This is a deeply embedded practice that pervades the English cultural imaginary. Discussing the idea of England, Davies, 2006 [2001], p. xxxviii) describes 'the widespread and unthinking, and unshakable belief in the unbroken continuity of "our island history". The belief is so strong that it crushes any sense of the need to change the names to match the changing reality.' (Davies, 2006 [2001], p.xxxviii) goes on to remark that: 'England is assumed to be fixed and eternal.' Davies' use of 'our island history' is a nod to Henrietta Marshall's 1905 children's history book *Our Island Story* which will be discussed below. Chedgzoy (2004, p. 26) has developed Davies' insight. She points out that:

> What Davies calls 'the one island fixation, embellished with an imperial flourish' is deeply embedded in the English political imaginary, and the material consequences of the over-literal English use of this metaphor are painfully familiar to the inhabitants of the other parts of this archipelago.

She goes on to comment on, 'the use of the island trope to depict England as sovereign nation and bounded geographical space' (Chedgzoy, 2004, p. 26). A characteristic of the English cultural imaginary is to think of England as a sovereign island. This subsumes Wales and Scotland, ignores Northern Ireland, and does not recognise the multiple islands that constitute what is really an archipelago. This way of thinking was pervasive among those campaigning for Leave in the referendum.

Having clarified some of the complexity around the use of the term England we can turn to the general question posed by the breakdown of the referendum results by nation which is, what urged the English to vote Leave when the other component parts of the United Kingdom, including Gibraltar by a matter of 95.91 percent, voted Remain. To begin answering that question we first need to examine the age and education demographics of the referendum result. The vote cut across traditional political voting patterns. Conservative voters voted 61 percent to Leave. Yet the leader of the Conservative party, and the prime minister who called the referendum, campaigned for Remain. Labour voters voted 65 percent to Remain while the leader of the party, Jeremy Corbyn, was ideologically wedded to

the idea of socialism in one country and wanted the United Kingdom to Leave (Cohen, 2018). While acknowledging that the percentages of the respective parties are both higher than the overall percentages to Leave and Remain there is still the 39 percent of Conservative voters who voted Remain and the 35 percent of Labour voters who voted Leave to account for. Staying or Leaving the European Union was regarded by voters as a single issue matter not something that could be integrated into overall party policy. Only the single issue United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) understandably had an almost perfect Leave vote of 95 percent.

In terms of age 50 was the faultline. For 18–24 year olds 71 percent voted Remain, 29 pecent voted Leave. For 25–49 year olds 54 percent voted Remain and 46 percent voted Leave. For 50–64 year olds, 40 percent voted Remain and 60 percent voted Leave. For over 65 year olds 36 percent voted Remain and 64 percent voted Leave. We shall appreciate the cultural importance of older people voting Leave later in a discussion of relevant television series. When education level is considered we find that the higher the level of educational achievement the more likely the person was to vote Remain, thus only 30 percent of people with GCSE or lower voted Remain while 68 percent of those with a degree or above voted Remain.

From these figures we can see that the preponderance of those voting Leave were older than 50, with limited educational qualifications and a tendency to support Conservative policies – indeed we might say a Conservative, perhaps traditional view of the United Kingdom, cast in terms of England, and its proper place in a continental order. This suggests that Leave voters were likely to have a less critical and more rosy view of the United Kingdom's past, a nostalgia for a mythic lost time when Britain had a homogeneous population, an empire, and when there was little violence and poverty. Stuart Cartland (2018) has commented on the importance of nostalgia in the pre- and post-Brexit England. He notes that: 'When the future (or even the present) is uncertain and unclear it can be very comforting to escape into a sense of constructed familiarity.' The past can offer such a recourse. Cartland is seeking to account for the popularity of television series such as *Downton Abbey, The Crown* and *Call the Midwife*. He argues that, 'such an exercise, particularly in a post-Brexit reality, is arguably built upon repetition and melancholy, longing for a lost age of national exceptionalism, independence and greatness' (Cartland, 2018). Cartland (2018) notes the importance of films like *Churchill, Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk* in the development of what he describes as 'a dominant conservative narrative of contemporary renewal within a context of disengagement' and he remarks that such a nostalgic revisioning of the past underpinned a justification of the Leave argument where 'the Leave campaign was built on nostalgic pastiche and myth.' What this article will add to this argument, aside from the importance of the topoi of invasion, occupation and sovereignty, is the importance of unresolved trauma resulting from the experience of the Second World War, something particularly obvious in Christopher Nolan's film *Dunkirk*.

Though he does not mention them, the kind of nostalgia identified by Cartland is characteristic of the English world portrayed in television shows such as *Dad's Army, Midsomer Murders*, and *The Vicar of Dibley* where only *Dad's Army*, a sit com about a Home Guard platoon, is set in the past, indeed in a mythic Second World War. It is, then, not surprising that these shows are liked more by older audiences. The YouGov site tells us that *Dad's Army* is liked by 43 percent of millennials,

53 percent of Gen Xers and 76 percent of baby boomers. *Midsomer Murders* is liked by 28 percent of millennials, 35 percent of Gen X and 55 percent of baby boomers. The figures for *The Vicar of Dibley* show a similar emphasis on baby boomers, liked by 53 percent of millennials, 59 percent of Gen X but 72 percent of baby boomers. These are the people who predominantly voted Leave.

Those over 50 in 2016 will have been children or teenagers before Britain joined the Common Market. They are more likely to remember the England of the end of wartime austerity and the so-called Swinging Sixties, including the new emphasis on consumption led by a leisure industry aimed at them as baby boomer teenagers, than the, what we might characterise as adult problems, 1972 miners' strike, the three day working week introduced to conserve electricity and the oil crisis of the following year. Indeed, all these, which mark the end of the consumption-led Swinging Sixties and the beginning of a time of economic crisis characterised by stagflation, a combination of low economic growth, high unemployment and inflation, are likely to be tangled up in memory with the United Kingdom joining the Common Market in 1973. At the time, joining the Common Market was viewed as a means to resolving the United Kingdom's economic difficulties. In this context baby boomers may have seen a vote to Leave in 2016 as a vote to take back sovereignty and control of England's (sic) destiny, including control over immigration. Immigration, linked with invasion, is understood as a source of England's ills, the loss of that homogeneous population coupled with people who look different, think differently, worship differently, the loss of a unified culture, which, we will see, typifies the worldview of all three television shows. It is no coincidence that the sitcom *The Vicar of Dibley* was about an Anglican vicar. Discussion of the show centres on the vicar being a woman (see Kramer, 2016, pp. 212–224). However, the core of the show is the importance of Anglican values holding the community together.

Invasion

It is difficult to know when the fear of invasion became naturalised as an aspect of the English cultural imaginary. In Cecil Eby's *The Road To Armageddon* (1987, p. 15) he mentions that in C. Louis' *Les Fictions guerrieres anglaises*, published in 1910, 'he concluded that fear of invasion is "endemic in England."' Eby himself argues that invasion fears have

> a kind of tidal flow dependent on imagined strengths or weaknesses of England's position in respect to outside powers. The last flood-tide had been experienced during the Napoleonic period when the French actually had planned a full-fledged invasion (1987, p. 15).

The first of the narratives about the invasion of England was *The Battle of Dorking* written by George Chesney and published at first anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1871. At the time Chesney was a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Engineers. In *The Battle of Dorking* the bulk of the British navy was otherwise engaged, protecting British colonies far from the Channel. The remainder is destroyed by a secret weapon the enemy has invented. Much of the army was dispersed, either in Canada or in Ireland. Consequently, when the unnamed power, but clearly Germany, occupies France and invades England, landing near Worthing, there is little organiseddefence. The battle of Dorking is lost and England is occupied. From being an industrialised country at the heart of an empire, England becomes a rural

backwater suffering under heavy taxes. The story is told by a grandfather who fought in England's defence to his grandchildren who are about to emigrate for a better life. Chesney's intent was to shock the government into boosting the armed forces which he felt were being neglected. The story generated such a demand for the issue of *Blackwood's Magazine* that the publisher reprinted it separately as a pamphlet. This immediately sold 80,000 copies. After the popularity of *The Battle of Dorking* over sixty invasion stories, some lifting off from Chesney's narrative, were published before the First World War (O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 131). In 1940, when the Nazis, to use that evocative term, were occupying France and threatening to invade England, that other evocative term, the Germans published a German language version of *The Battle of Dorking, Was England Erwartet* which translates as What England Can Expect.

As we shall see, after the Second World War British Invasion literature looks backwards to what might have happened if Hitler and the Nazis had invaded. At the same time the fears about invasion get displaced onto immigration. As immigration becomes a site of anxiety this manifests in a concern with the breakdown of the mythically homogeneous English society. The Anglophile American poet and essayist TS Eliot put this position very well in *After Strange Gods*:

> The population should be homogeneous, where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are either likely to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable. There must be a proper balance between urban and rural, industrial and agricultural development. And a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated (2018 [1934], p. 20).

After Strange Gods was the published version of a series of lectures, the Page-Barbour Lectures, that Eliot gave at the University of Virginia in 1933. The book was published in 1934. While critics usually identify this paragraph as being anti-Semitic Eliot is making a more general point (see Julius, 1995, pp. 41–74). Culture, he thinks, should be homogeneous and this follows from having a homogeneous population. Eliot is using Jews here to illustrate unwanted racial, or indeed we would say, ethnic, diversity. From today's perspective Eliot would decry multiculturalism and resist immigration. Eliot's ideal world is that of the mythic English community of *Dad's Army, Midsomer Murders* and *The Vicar of Dibley*. In the Brexit referendum, were he able to vote, Eliot would no doubt have voted Leave. The other point here is that the fantasy of England (sic) as having a homogeneous culture underpinned by a taken-for-granted Anglicanism runs deep within the English social and cultural imaginary. England, Eliot is suggesting, cannot survive as a homogeneous culture if 'too many' people of diverse religions live there.

Midsomer murders

Based on the detective novels of Caroline Graham, *Midsomer Murders* was first shown on ITV in 1997. It has now run for over twenty series and 118 episodes. The first episode was watched by 13.5 million viewers, the highest number for a drama in that year. Ten years later the average viewing numbers had declined to around five million but the show was still taking about 20 percent of the television audience during its time slot (Bergin, 2012, p. 84). In his history of Brexit Tim Shipman (2016 p. 8) tells this story about David

Cameron and Angela Merkel: 'The German chancellor had been to Chequers in 2010, when they kicked back watching episodes of *Midsomer Murders*. "Just think, all this could have been yours," Cameron had joked.' There is a different version of this story told by the political commentator and broadcaster Iain Dale (2013):

> Anyway, the two were taking a walk in the Chequers countryside one Sunday afternoon and came to a hill overlooking the Buckinghamshire countryside. They stared silently in wonderment at the scene before them. 'To think, Angela,' said Cameron, 'if things had turned out differently, this could have all been yours.' Merkel's immediate reply isn't recorded. But on her return to Germany she apparently sent her friend Dave a box set of *Dad's Army* DVDs. I'm told Merkel herself is a huge fan of *Midsomer Murders*, and last Christmas Cameron sent her the complete series boxset for her enjoyment.

The story has the quality of an urban myth. In one version Cameron suggests that the mythic England portrayed in a *Midsomer Murders* could have been invaded and occupied by the Nazis. In the other version it is the actual England that could have been invaded and occupied. We know that Merkel very much likes *Midsomer Murders*. Indeed, Cameron organised a binge watch for her at Chequers. It was probably during this that he made the remark, or after this that the two went for a walk and Cameron made the remark while they gazed on the real English countryside. In the second version of the story Merkel, the German, ironically sends Cameron the nostalgic fantasy of *Dad's Army* where the incompetent Home Guard protect the mythic England from invasion by the Nazis. In both versions World War II and the threat of Nazi invasion are present. They exist as the return of the traumatic repressed, expressing the fear of the loss of that mythic, idyllic England, in much the same way as, as we shall see, Basil Fawlty acts out such a return of the traumatic repressed in 'The Germans' episode of *Fawlty Towers*.

One of the appeals of *Midsomer Murders* is the show's portrayal of a small, village-based English community, indeed a number of them, where the cultural homogeneity is visually manifested in its ethno-racial homogeneity. In a promotional article for the show's American television release, Kate O'Hare (1998) writes:

> Although the books are set in the present and the crimes carry more than a whiff of perversity, Graham's rural England – with its thatched, rose-crowded cottages, nosy neighbours and winding lanes – seems to come from another time. 'The spirit is obviously of the '50s,' says Nettles, 'The stories happen in a world which is much younger than ours, much smaller too, less crowded too, with more room for individual crankiness and eccentricity. It's an escape from the modern world.

John Nettles plays Detective Chief Inspector Barnaby. Here Nettles implies the nostalgia of the show. Set in the present, *Midsomer Murders* offers viewers a mythic homogeneous English past. Nettles identifies it as the 1950s, in this mythic history, a society not yet transformed by South Asian and Caribbean migration. The show was cocreated and produced by Brian True-May. He gave an interview in 2011 to the *Radio Times* in which he explained: 'We just don't have ethnic minorities involved. Because it wouldn't be the English village with them. It just wouldn't work. Suddenly we might be in Slough. . We're the last bastion of Englishness and I want to keep it that way' (Barnes, 2011). Wikipedia describes Slough: 'As of 2011 Slough's population was one of the most ethnically diverse in the United Kingdom. Slough is urban, globalised, and industrial.' True-May is correct, Slough is racially and culturally varied in the multicultural ways that the villages of

Midsomer are not. True-May was suspended and there was much agonising over his apparent racism, and questions were asked about whether English country villages really were racially homogeneous or purely white. All this missed the point. The county of Midsomer is an expression of an English fantasy, it is made up of villages that are racially and culturally homogeneous.

In *Midsomer Murders*, as is typical of English Anglicanism, religion is embedded in the lived moral order, not in any assertion of the Christian life through institutional religion. It is this ingrained Anglicanism that provides the lived moral compass for the members of the community. In 'Murder Most Bleak' Leslie Keeney (2011) writes that:

> While *Midsomer Murders* probably isn't any more violent than, for example, *Law and Order: SVU*, its worldview is bleaker. Almost every episode features the ubiquitous local vicarage, but there is little indication that anyone, including the vicar, has any belief in a transcendent God. On the rare occasion that an evangelical Christian shows up, he or she is invariably portrayed as an intolerant fanatic with a secret sexual fetish – or just plain crazy.

This completely misunderstands how religion functions in Anglicanism as it evolved in England. Unlike institutional religion, including evangelical Christianity, Anglicanism is a part of life in the community. Indeed, it is the moral bond that holds the community together. Here we have Eliot's argument for the importance of a unity of religious background. The complaint that evangelicals are portrayed as deviant is correct in that, from the point of view of Christianity as being primarily a moral force of community life, overt displays of Christianity, aside from occasional visits to church, are themselves understood as deviant. As Keeney (2011) goes on to write:

> But while *Midsomer Murders*' view of life is unrelentingly bleak, it is also undergirded by an intuitive morality. Regardless of how depraved the local inhabitants are, Inspector Barnaby's entire worldview is predicated on the assumption that life is better than death, order is better than chaos, and avoiding deviant secrets is the best way to preserve one's sanity.

Barnaby isn't a regular attender at church but he would regard himself as having a Christian outlook. Here, Keeney offers insight into the way Anglicanism integrates with everyday life in the (mythical) organic community without appreciating its Christian basis. This, though, is how religious life is lived in both *Dad's Army* and *Midsomer Murders* and, of course, in *The Vicar of Dibley*. The values of Anglicanism flow upward from the community and religious practice, such as going to church, becomes as expression of the community in which the church is embedded.

Immigration

Although there was a significant racial diversity in England before the Second World War the mythic start of the transformation of the United Kingdom into a racially diverse society is identified with the docking of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury in 1948. The ship carried slightly over 1000 passengers. Of these, 802 came from the Caribbean. As Maeve Kennedy (2018) writes,

> by 1948 there were generations of earlier arrivals, and many *Windrush* passengers were making return journeys, including war veterans. They received an official welcome, and sympathetic coverage, though the *Daily Graphic*, under the headline 'Thames Welcome for West Indians' added the ominous subhead 'Start of Invasion'.

Here we can see how immediately immigration was linked with invasion. Kennedy (2018) goes on:

> The virulently racist pamphlet *Black and White News* picked up the line a few months later: 'Blacks Invade Britain' – over a photograph of notably patient and orderly queue – headed a story beginning 'Here is a familiar sight in Britain today. Another immigrant boat has docked and from it another train packed with blacks pulls into a British city'.

We also get a sense here that this racism is not just based on race per se but is about what is perceived to be a loss of homogeneity in English society.

We can pick up this theme again in Christopher Priest's dystopian novel *Fugue for a Darkening Island*, published in 1972 and revised and republished in 2011. There has been a nuclear war in Africa. As a consequence there are millions of displaced people, mostly it would seem men, who seek succour and refuge elsewhere in the world: 'In the course of about a year, just over two million of them landed in Britain' (Priest 2011 [1972], p. 69). The novel is written in the first person. The protagonist is Alan Whitman, a liberal college lecturer with a wife and daughter. His name describes his race. In spite of Priest's protestations it is clear that this is not only a novel about race, it is a racist novel.[1] *Fugue* can be read as a meditation on the fear of the destruction of white Englishness and its governing institutions as a consequence of the impact of black migration. Published twenty-four years after the *Empire Windrush* docked, Priest's novel transforms the Caribbean migrants into invading African refugees.

Whitman tells us that the first boat carrying Africans, 'a medium-sized cargo tramp, registered in Liberia', sails unimpeded up the Thames to London Bridge where it became stuck. He observes the disorderly disembarkation which the police and customs officials are unable to stop:

> we watched them with a mixture of horror and fascination. There were men, women and children. Most if not all were in an advanced state of starvation. Skeletal arms and legs, distended stomachs, skull-like heads holding staring eyes; flat, paper-like breasts on the women, accusing faces on them all. Most were naked or nearly so. Many of the children could not walk. Those whom no one would carry were left on the ship (Priest 2011 [1972], p. 17).

Whitman tells us he learnt later that there were over seven hundred corpses on the boat, welfare authorities took charge of 4,500 and about 3000 simply wandered off into the streets of London (Priest 2011 [1972], p. 18). Here we have a nightmare version of the *Empire Windrush* arriving at Tilbury. This first boatload is followed by many more. The right-wing, nationalist government cannot cope as it is increasingly immersed in a civil war. The Afrims as they are called roam the country destroying everything and placing captured white women in brothels. This is what happens to Whitman's wife and daughter. The stereotyping is egregious. The novel ends with Whitman finding the bodies of his family. This stirs him to a violence he had not previously found. He murders an African and takes his gun. There the novel ends. There is no future, simply retribution. Immigration has become invasion and English society has been destroyed. In the much later film *Children of Men*, released in 2006, we find an English society breaking down because no children are being born. The film is based on *The Children of Men*, a novel by P D James. One of things the director Alfonso Cuarón adds is the refugees trying to get into England. These disparate people are kept in cages. Bexhill-on-Sea, on the south coast, as it happens only forty-two miles from Worthing where Chesney's invading

Germans landed and part of the stretch of coast where Hitler had planned to land troops, has been turned into an internment camp. Again, immigration is refigured as invasion.

Immigration was a key issue in the discussions around Brexit. It was fundamentally linked with the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. A report by *The Migration Observatory* found that: 'In the year or so before the EU referendum, between June 2015 and June 2016, immigration was consistently named as the most salient issue facing the country, peaking at 56 percent in September 2015' (Blinder, 2012). In 1994 only 5 percent of the British population thought immigration was a problem. It is clear that the accession of the A8 countries to membership of the European Union in 2004 marked a significant turning point in British attitudes. These were countries which had in an earlier time been a part of the Soviet Bloc such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. In 2007 Bulgaria and Romania joined. As many of these countries had a standard of living significantly lower than in the United Kingdom there was a fear, not reflected to anywhere near the same extent in the other core countries of the European Union, of large numbers of citizens of the new member states moving to the United Kingdom to work and take advantage of Britain's welfare provisions. It was a fear in which we can see again the translation of immigration into invasion. Denny Pencheva (2019) has analysed reports relating to immigration in six national British newspapers between 2006 and 2013. She found that: 'The most prominent theme was that mobility within the EU damages British sovereignty.' Furthermore, Pencheva (2019) writes that:

> The language used to describe EU migration tended to emphasise quantity and scale ('mass', 'vast', 'large scale'). There were lots of 'floods' and 'waves' and extensive use of military metaphors ('army', 'war', 'battle', 'siege' or 'hordes') in the tabloid press.

All these terms relate to invasion and occupation and directly impact the fear of loss of sovereignty.

The conflation of immigration and invasion in the English cultural imaginary was a key factor in the Leave vote. In the aftermath of the referendum there was an increase in hate crimes. Dearden (2017) writes:

> Data from police forces across England and Wales showed there were almost 80,400 hate crimes recorded in 2016-17 financial year. The figure is a 29 percent rise from the previous year – the largest annual increase since records began six years ago.

More specifically, Rohit Sudarshan (undated) tells us that:

> In the days following the UK's decision to leave the EU, there was a 57 percent increase across the nation in hate crimes, as reported by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). However, the increase in some of the most Eurosceptic parts of the country was even more acute. Derbyshire, for example, saw a 121 percent rise in the first week following the referendum while Nottinghamshire experienced a 140 percent increase. Both counties were among the several counties of the central UK with a majority vote to leave.

These attacks were on non-white people as well as migrants from Eastern Europe. The most important factor was a claim about Englishness or lack of it:

> Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) party of England, confessed that there were factors above the typical racial preference regarding his immigration beliefs. He explains that he has a preference for other English-speaking immigrants such as those from India and Australia

> who are 'naturally more likely to understand common law, and have a connection with this country than some people who come perhaps from countries that haven't fully recovered from being behind the Iron Curtain' (Sudarshan, undated).

Here we see a concern with a mythical Englishness overriding race, Farage prefers people from India, where he believes they speak English, and Australia which he seems to think of as white and still dominated by people with a British heritage, while his anxieties are focused on those who come from countries that were under communist rule and who, in his logic, have a way of life alien to English culture. Maike Bohn, founding member of The European Union citizens' support group the3million has commented

> I would never compare what is happening to fellow EU citizens to what is happening to other minorities – they are the main victims. But what is clear to me that during the referendum and afterwards everything has been lumped together – refugees, Muslims, people who are 'not us coming here' (Dearden, 2018).

Bohn identifies what we could call *The Vicar of Dibley* syndrome, people defined as 'not us' by religion because, as Eliot implies, Anglicanism is a basic element of Englishness

After Poland's entry into the European Union around 750,000 Poles had moved to the United Kingdom by the time of the referendum bringing the total number of recent Polish-born residents to about 800,000. Because of their visibility, it was the Poles who suffered the worst from the spike in hate crimes:

> In the hours and days following the Brexit vote, there were incidents of racist graffiti on the stores and homes in the Polish quarters of several English cities, including in London and Cambridgeshire. Hateful comments on social media were accompanied by direct abuse from patrons at restaurants and patients at hospitals (Sudarshan, undated).

During the Second World War many Poles fought alongside British troops. In 1947, after the allies allowed Russia to take control of Poland, the Polish Resettlement Act offered British citizenship to around 200,000 members of the Polish armed forces based in the United Kingdom. Twenty-one years later *Dad's Army* was to make a xenophobic joke at the expense of the Poles. In 'The Enemy Within the Gates' (season 1 ep 4) a Polish officer named Winogrodzki visits the platoon from HQ Area Command. He tells the platoon that a bounty of ten pounds is offered for every Nazi airman taken captive alive. The platoon captures two airmen who then escape. After they are recaptured by Winogrodzki, Private Walker, the platoon wide boy, persuades the MPs who come for them to take Winogrodzki also, using his accent as proof he is not English. Made in 1968 the episode specifically excludes Poles from Englishness. Nelson (2005, p. 66) comments about *Dad's Army* that:

> at worst, it appeals to a xenophobia arising from an insular culture … The experience of life in a socially fragmented Britain, a member of the European Union, under a right-leaning 'New Labour' government … may be different, but it seems that *Dad's Army* brings out not so much nostalgia as a myth of Old England.

The invasion against which the Home Guard of *Dad's Army* continues to protect England is in the first place that of the Nazis but includes all foreigners, especially Poles. *Dad's Army*'s defence of a mythic England against invasion provides a continuity with the Leave argument's fear of immigration. In November 2018 Jacob Rees-Mogg, Conservative member of parliament and prominent Brexiteer, was part of a failed

coup by Brexiteers against prime minister Theresa May: 'When asked if the plot had gone "a bit *Dad's Army*" he replied "I've always admired Captain Mainwaring"' (Clarke, Gye, & Dathan, 2018). As one of the leading Leave campaigners it is not surprising that Rees-Mogg should find the pompous and incompetent Captain Mainwaring who is in charge of the Home Guard platoon nevertheless admirable.

The second world war and cultural trauma

It was Hitler's planned invasion, Operation Sea Lion, that has generated the post-Second World War traumatisation of the fear of invasion which has surfaced in the rhetoric of those arguing for the United Kingdom to Leave the European Union. These arguments usually take the fear of invasion back to William, Duke of Normandy's invasion of England in 1066. Thus, for example, Anoosh Chakalian (2018) notes in an article in *The New Statesman* in 2012 that Boris Johnson, mayor of London between 2008 and 2016, senior Conservative politician and vocal supporter of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, 'writing in his *Telegraph* column today refers to 1066 … "If Chequers were adopted it would mean that for the first time since 1066 … our leaders were acquiescing to foreign rule."' Christopher Kissane (2018), writing in *The Irish Times* tells us that: 'The Norman Conquest was "the last time we were invaded and taken over", explained former UKIP leader Nigel Farage when wearing a Bayeux tapestry tie while campaigning, and to Rees-Mogg it is the only parallel for the "foreign rule" that would be a Brexit transition period.'

William's conquest of England was not the first in recorded history, there was Julius Caesar's invasion and conquest in 54BCE and the Viking conquests during the ninth and tenth centuries culminating in the reign of Cnut, king of both England and Denmark. However, it is William's invasion and occupation of England in 1066 that has been constructed as a watershed in English history. As Michael Clanchy (2014 [1983], p. 35) writes: 'The Norman Conquest supplies a point of interest and identification for almost any point of view and this explains the variety of the problems and the difficulty of resolving them.' Reflecting the way of thinking of the Brexiteers, Morris (2012, p. 7), in his popular history *The Norman Conquest*, writes:

> There is still a widespread assumption with the Norman Conquest that the Normans are 'them' and the English are 'us'. The Normans, it goes without saying, are the villains of the piece, responsible for introducing into England bad things like feudalism and the class system. The notion persists that pre-Conquest England had been a much nicer place – freer, more liberal, with representative institutions and better rights for women. Thus the Conquest is still regarded in many quarters as a national tragedy.

However, as Morris goes on: 'But almost all of this is a myth'(2012, p. 7). This pre-Norman idyll is a version of the mythical homogeneous English community that forms the backdrop for shows like *Midsomer Murders* and is a reference point for the Brexiteers. The concern with the Norman Conquest and the debate about its impact on England goes back at least well into the nineteenth century when the Tory Romantic, historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle wrote in support of William's invasion [*History of Frederick of Prussia* 1858].

It would seem that the evolving school curriculum of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consolidated the Norman Conquest, located in the specific event of the Battle of Hastings and the death in that battle of Harold, king of England, as the

turning point in English history. The key book here is Henrietta Marshall's 1905 highly romanticised children's history that has already been mentioned, *Our Island Story*. Marshall writes about the Battle of Hastings:

> As the day drew to an end it was seen, alas, that the English were beaten. They gathered close around their king and his standard, fighting fiercely and bravely to the last. And when Harold fell, pierced with an arrow, his brave knights fought still over his dead body. But when night came, all the bravest and best men of England lay with their king, dead upon the field.

William is described as 'fierce and cruel.' Marshall calls Harold the 'last of the English kings', not mentioning that he was related to King Cnut, and has him 'fighting for the freedom of his people and his country.' *Our Island Story* was republished in 2005 when the publisher Galore Park claimed it had sold 20,000 copies in the first week. Wellings (2016, p. 368) argues that the republication

> should be seen as part of the wider politics of disengagement from the European Union and part of the repositioning of the United Kingdom as a globally oriented actor seeking renewed engagement with traditional allies in the so-called Anglosphere: a loose international community based on a shared language, history, culture and politics.

David Cameron picked *Our Island Story* as his favourite childhood book in October 2010. In that same month the Conservative Education Secretary Michael Gove, another supporter of Brexit, gave a speech about the school curriculum titled 'Our Island Story'. He said:

> The current approach we have to history denies children the opportunity to hear our island story. Children are given a mix of topics at primary, a cursory run through Henry the Eighth and Hitler at secondary and many give up the subject at 14, without knowing how the vivid episodes of our past become a connected narrative. Well, this trashing of our past has to stop (Gove 2010).

Clearly he had Marshall's book in mind as part of the remedy.[2]

Writing about the much-celebrated satire by W C Sellar and R J Yeatman, *1066 and All That*, published in 1930, Alexandra Cochrane (undated) argues that the book 'is definitely a parody of the school history curriculum in the early to mid-20th century.' For Sellar and Yeatman, the Norman Conquest was, as they put it, a Good Thing not for any social benefits it brought but because 'as from this time onwards England stopped being conquered and thus was able to become top nation' (1998 [1930], p. 25). In other words, the Norman Conquest marked the last invasion of England which enabled the country to stay peaceful and concentrate on overpowering other countries and, one presumes, establishing an empire. What was good about William's invasion is that it was the last. It is this claim that Farage and other Brexiteers such as Gove and Johnson make either implicitly or explicitly when they characterise the European Union, most particularly Germany and with Second World War Nazi overtones, as invaders taking away British sovereignty. The historian Simon Schama described Gove's proposed reforms to the schools' history curriculum as '*1066 and All That* but without the jokes' (Rahim, 2013). William's invasion and conquest was not the last in British history, in 1688 William of Orange, who had married Mary the daughter of James who became James II in 1685 arrived to displace his father-in-law. William landed at Brixham in Devon with a fleet of 250 troop-carrying ships and 60 fishing boats carrying 35,000 men. However, by making

the Norman Conquest the last, and portraying the Normans as fundamentally alien to the English way of life, the Brexiteers not only follow Sellar and Yeatman's satirical view of English history, they increase the distance between the last successful invasion and the Nazi threat repeated in the traumatic reconstruction of the European Union and in this way increase even more the fear of the claimed loss of sovereignty.

I have suggested that unresolved cultural trauma related to the British experience of World War II continues to impact on England's perception of its relationship with Germany and the European Union more generally. This provides a way of accounting for why in the early 2000s a survey of English schoolchildren found that for 68 percent the most famous German they knew of was still Hitler and that: 'A more recent survey conducted by the British council and the Goethe Institute suggested that the Nazi past and national sport still occupy a place in the minds of young British people when they think of Germany and the Germans' (Wittlinger, 2004, p. 457). Alexander (2004, p. 1) theorises that:

> Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

Alexander's example is the Holocaust (see Stratton, 2018, pp. 239–261). Alexander and his colleagues, 'maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution' (2004, p. 8). It is here that we can find the link between the long-term anxieties of those who identify as English, anxieties I have identified as invasion, occupation, sovereignty, and their traumatic reconstruction as a function of the Second World War. From Kissane's (2018) perspective:

> In the British mind, that [British] history remains centred on the Second World War, the 'darkest' and 'finest' hour in which Britain imagines it stood alone in defiance of Nazism, not as a global imperialist allied to emerging superpowers. Winston Churchill is omnipresent on screen and shelves – his support for a united Europe ignored – and the 'spirit' of Dunkirk and the blitz are staples of the tabloid press's European coverage.

Developing the idea of cultural trauma in a more psychoanalytic way than Alexander would probably approve, we can suggest that as with individual trauma, in cultural trauma if there is no resolution the event experienced as traumatising is constantly re-enacted. To give one example of this happening, in June 1996 the *Daily Mirror* used this headline: 'Achtung! Surrender – For you Fritz ze Euro 96 Championship is over' (Wittlinger, 2004, p. 457). The headline referred to the forthcoming semi-final of the UEFA European Football Championship between Germany and England using stereotyped language recalling the Second World War.[3] Here we have the association of the Germans with both the Second World War and sport made clear. It is reminiscent of the English football chant sung when the English national team is playing the German national team: 'Two world wars and one World Cup.'

The phrase 'Achtung! Surrender' suggests the language used in the boys' comic books set in the Second World War. There were many but the two main series of these were War Picture Library and Commando, from 1993 Commando for Action and Adventure. War Picture Library began publishing in 1958 and stopped in 1984. The pocket-sized comic books each contained a complete story in black and white running over 64 pages. They were published monthly. Commando published in a similar format

but of 68 pages. Commando started publishing two issues a month but in 1971, such was their popularity the number of issues increased to eight a month. At their peak in that decade each issue could sell around 750,000 copies. In the 2000s each issue still sells roughly 9,600. The stories centred on the courage and resilience of the British soldiers and the cowardice and treachery of the Nazis. The illustrations reinforced the stereotyping. The Nazi soldiers were given phrases like 'Achtung!', 'Mein Gott' and 'Donner und Bliztzen' (see Dobbs, 2018). For boys growing up between the 1950s and 1980s these comic books introduced many of them to the Second World War and to the evil Nazis. The books were part of the traumatic experience of the Second World War handed down in Britain from generation to generation and would have been often read by baby boomers and even Gen Xers around the age of twelve. They form a part of the backdrop to the members of the Leave campaign's use of Second World War imagery.

John Cleese commented on the continuing reading of Germans through the Second World War and as Nazis in a 1975 episode of the sitcom *Fawlty Towers*. A group of young Germans come to stay at the hotel. The key scene plays out in the restaurant where Basil Fawlty, played by Cleese, is serving them. Basil has been accidentally hit on the head with a frying pan. The resulting concussion makes his behaviour even more socially transgressive than usual. Indeed, one reading would be that the concussion allows Basil to say clearly, and directly to the German tourists, what would otherwise be thought by the English but unacceptable to speak to guests. Basil's entire interaction with the Germans revolves around him attempting not to mention the war, and failing. The scene functions as a recognition of trauma. At one point, having alluded to the war a number of times, Basil leaves the restaurant to speak with Polly, the hotel's waitress and maid. He advises her not to mention the war to the German guests and remarks, 'I mentioned it once but I think I got away with it.' He hadn't, of course, and the rest of the scene involves Basil's escalating attempts to deny he mentioned the war while making increasingly obvious references to it including pretending to be Hitler and goose stepping around the restaurant and, finally, accusing the Germans of being 'humourless krauts' and asking rhetorically who won the war.

Cleese made the episode after the vote for the United Kingdom to stay in the Common Market and he has Basil comment, when the tourists arrive, that he didn't vote in the referendum but if he had it would have been for Britain to stay out. Basil draws a direct link between Britain's entry into the Common Market and the presence of Germans in Britain and, indeed, in his hotel. In this traumatic repetition the German tourists are treated as Nazi invaders enabled entry to Britain by Britain joining the Common Market. Cleese has said that most English people think the scene laughs at Germans but: 'It was a joke about English attitudes to the war and the fact that some people were still hanging onto that rubbish' (Graham, 2008). That the English assume the scene is focused on the German tourists rather than on Cleese's behaviour as representative of English attitudes suggests the extent to which the views Cleese portrays, albeit hyperbolically, are regarded as normal and acceptable. The phrase 'Don't mention the war' has become a generally known piece of English repartee.

The discussions about Brexit, and the failures to reach decisions within the British parliament, are often described, particularly by journalists outside of the United Kingdom, using the term psychodrama. Thus, for example, Joris Luyendijk (Dutch

journalist, political commentator and author of non-fiction books) writes in 'A Polite Request from Europe: wake us up when you know what you want from Brexit':

> That the British political and media establishment is engrossed by this week's edition of that long-running psychodrama called Brexit is forgivable; it is their country, and the episode promises to be an action-packed one. But for many Europeans, the meaningful vote is just more of the same: the Brits still don't know what they want, so the politicians go round and round and round, and then round some more (2019).

Similarly, Chris Johns in *The Irish Times* 23 September 2018 headlined an article 'Brexit psychodrama dances a little closer to no-deal abyss.' Jon Henley et al (2019) published an article in *The Guardian* on 12 February 2019 titled: '"Un big mess"; how the rest of Europe views Brexit.' In it we find: 'As Brexit turns to what one French commentator called a "national psychodrama" … many French are addressing Britons with the sympathy usually reserved for the bereaved.' In psychodramas past life situations, including traumas, are acted out in the hope of bringing insight and relief to the person. In one succinct description: 'Psychodrama offers a creative way for an individual or group to explore and solve personal problems' (Wikipedia). Except, in the case of Brexit the psychodrama acts out the trauma without hope of resolution because the participants do not realise what they are doing. For Britons, including parliamentarians, Brexit is real life – not life mediated through cultural trauma.

Writing about individuals, Peter Felix Kellerman has described how Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

> characteristically consists of anxiety and depression following a known traumatic event. The person is continuing to experience the trauma in vivid recollections and nightmares, has reduced interest in the external world and suffers from many more or less physical symptoms such as hyperalertness and sleep disturbances. Frequently, there is a contradictory (and largely paradoxical) effort both to remember and to forget, both to approach and to avoid the traumatic event in a compulsive repeated fashion (2000, p. 23).

We can rework this for cultural trauma. In cultural trauma the anxiety and depression can manifest in, as Cartland puts it writing about the impact of Brexit in England, a retreat from Brexit anxiety into repetition and melancholy, a longing for a mythical idyllic past which existed before the traumatising event, in this case before the United Kingdom entered the Common Market/European Union and, indeed, before the Second World War, when things seemed to be simpler and better. Kellermann (2000, p. 26) explains that: 'Repetitive re-enactments of traumatic events are both characteristic signs of traumatisation and an essential part of most trauma treatment approaches.' Psychodrama as therapy seeks to help the traumatised individual accept and move on from the event experienced as traumatic. Repetition without the psychodramatic therapy repeats, often without the self-recognition that repetition is taking place, the event experienced as trauma.

Caruth (1995, p. 5) notes that: 'The traumatised … carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptoms of a history they cannot themselves possess.' Where in individual trauma the trauma is often re-enacted in recollections and nightmares, in cultural trauma cultural texts, many of them categorised as fiction, such as films, novels and television shows, take on that role. The culture, as in individual trauma, both attempts to remember and forget. This is the logic of repression in process. The traumatising event may appear in disguised form or may even appear as something

desired. In relation to the Second World War the functioning of repression is most obvious in a film like *Dunkirk*.

Dunkirk, the Nazi invasion Myth and leaving the European union

The first thing to notice is that two films about Winston Churchill and the film about Dunkirk, *Churchill, Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk*, were all released in 2017. Cartland notes their relation to the development of a conservative narrative which helped to legitimise the Leave vote. To these films we can add the republishing of *Our Island Story* in 2005, *Fugue for a Darkening Island* in 2011 and *If Britain Had Fallen* in 2012. What we can also say, especially for *Dunkirk*, is that the film functions to diminish the traumatic anxiety related to invasion, occupation and loss of sovereignty by transforming the evacuation of troops from the Dunkirk beaches into an almost painless victory. During May 1940 the allied forces in northern France including French and Belgian army groups and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) found themselves badly outmanoeuvred and overpowered. By May 20 the BEF along with the French first army and the Belgian army were cut off and confined to an area around the coastal town of Dunkirk. On May 24 the German army was ordered to pause its advance. Between May 26 and June 4 the British mounted a massive evacuation of the beleaguered troops. In the face of continual attacks by the Luftwaffe over 330,000 men were evacuated across the Channel. One of the most highlighted aspects of the operation in the dominant narrative was the use of around 700 small boats, some operated by naval personnel, some sailed privately by their owners, to ferry men off the beaches to the large naval ships and even to carry them back across the Channel to ports on the south coast of England. Churchill, who had become prime minister on May 10, in a speech to the House of Commons on June 4 characterised the evacuation: 'A miracle of deliverance, achieved by valour, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by skill, by unconquerable fidelity, is manifest to us all.' Churchill's celebrated speech began the construction of the British myth of Dunkirk. What was a humiliating defeat for the allied forces was transformed in British memory into a heroic victory by concentrating on the number of men who were rescued. Before the unlikely pause in the German advance the British had planned to rescue around 45,000 men.

The myth of Dunkirk inevitably leaves out a great deal. Perhaps most importantly around half the rescued men were not British. They were French, Polish and Belgian. The rescue also included three contingents of the Royal Indian Service Corps, which is to say that not all the troops rescued were white. 40,000 British servicemen were left behind and were captured and interned by the Germans. During the evacuation many men died in awful circumstances:

John Davis, from Birmingham, witnessed horrific scenes at Dunkirk.

> "There was this lovely white hospital ship. I'd helped to load the walking wounded on board. It had just got underway when six Stuka dive-bombers attacked it, and in five minutes it was a blazing inferno, we could still hear the screams of dying men for a couple of hours afterwards. How they could attack a hospital ship is beyond comprehension"(Sweeting, 2010).

While hundreds of thousands of men were saved the losses of equipment were immense. Robert Forczyk (2016) offers this itemisation and commentary:

> British materiel losses in France were catastrophic. At Dunkirk alone, the British army lost 2,347 artillery pieces (55 percent of its total inventory), 509 2-pounder anti-tank guns (60 percent of its total) and 615 tanks (47 percent of its total). In addition, the British abandoned 63,879 vehicles as well as 76,000 tons of ammunition and 165,000 tons of petrol.

All these losses have been elided in the myth of the numbers of men rescued and the small boats and plucky civilians who aided that rescue. This latter part of the myth, the plucky civilians, draws on the same fantasy of English community which can be found in *Dad's Army*, a show which nostalgically portrays the Home Guard as bumblers muddling through who nevertheless succeed against highly trained German military on the rare occasion they come into contact with them – in one case when they are asked to guard a captured U-boat crew.

A key aspect of the Dunkirk myth is its imbrication with the invasion topos. It was Churchill, again, who first made the connection, and in the same speech where he began the myth of Dunkirk. Churchill made the link by way of acknowledging that the Channel ports were now in enemy hands. This made invasion a greater possibility. His first rhetorical move was to bring together the present possibility of invasion with an earlier one: 'We are told that Herr Hitler has a plan for invading the British Isles. This has often been thought of before' (Churchill, 1940). Churchill then refers to Napoleon. Near the end of the speech Churchill utilises the English fear of invasion to unite the population in Britain's defence asserting that, 'we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender' (1940). We should note that Churchill says nothing about cities here. Streets, rather than roads, conjures an image of villages and towns not urban centres. This Britain is the mythic rural idyll of *Dad's Army, Midsomer Murders* and *The Vicar of Dibley*. It is the English myth of the British Isles, as an island, that Churchill is asking Britons to defend.

In 1940, especially after Dunkirk, and after Churchill had so eloquently made the connection, there was a pervasive fear of invasion. Garfield (2006, p. 324) has drawn on five diaries kept for the Mass Observation team for an account of ordinary people's experience of the war. Here is Christopher Tomlin from 5 August 1940, eight weeks after the Dunkirk evacuation:

> I am so despondent when I see Britain waiting for invasion. Why do we wait? Why don't we harry Germany's long coastline and give her a bloody good tossing. Has the Viking fire forsaken our bones?

The preoccupation with invasion was ever present. Maggie Joy Blunt wrote in her diary on 9 September 1940: 'Life goes on. That is what amazes and thrills me. In spite of this increasing terror and destruction over London and the constant rumours of invasion, we get our food, our papers and letters' (Garfield, 2006, p. 361). Bell (2009, p. 155), writing about the experience of the blitz in London comments that: 'The British public regime of stoicism created a wartime urban culture of psychological tension as civilians sought to minimize or repress their fears except in moments of intense terror.' It is this stoicism that we see in these apparently matter-of-fact mentions of invasion. To this seeming sanguinity we can add the enforced silence of the soldiers evacuated from Dunkirk who

were told not tell anybody about what they had been through (Raban, 2017). Writing about the general feeling of the population in 1940 Calder (1994, p. 109) argues that, 'there is … ample evidence, familiar and unfamiliar, to indicate widespread fear and paranoia bordering on panic.' Sometimes the rumours of an invasion suggested the fantastical, like the dreams of someone repeating events experienced as trauma. Pam Ashford recounts on 13 September 1940:

> Mr Mitchell has met a naval man who says there was an attempt at invasion off Yorkshire recently. Barges propelled by airplane engines for speed were encircled by our naval vessels. We dropped depth charges and the explosions so agitated the waters that the barges were capsized and the Germans drowned (Garfield, 2006, p. 366).

This dream-like fictitious invasion was defeated but the rumour suggests the fear and anxiety across the country.

There has been some debate over the historical accuracy of Nolan's film of the Dunkirk evacuation (see Broich, 2017; Sebag-Montifiore, 2017). Ian Jack (2018) argues that *Dunkirk*, along with *Darkest Hour* 'have come to be seen as a reflection and endorsement of the Brexit mood, with headlines in the pro-Brexit press such as "For Brexit to work we need the Dunkirk spirit, not Naysaying Nellies" and "We will channel Churchill Brexiteers warn Michel Barnier."' It is not just the topics of the films but the way they represent the events they portray. Jack describes the enthusiastic reaction of audiences to the films and goes on:

> Those reactions suggest an England congratulating itself on its past – an idealised past shorn of inconvenient fact. The films, especially *Dunkirk*, are sometimes brilliant cinematically, and yet are utterly conventional in their patriotism and presentation of character (2018).

The important inaccuracies in *Dunkirk* are not related to the events themselves. In his review of the film David Cox (2017) asks rhetorically what is the film about and answers,

> another stab at war as hell. Except *Dunkirk* is no such thing. It is a 12a effort that avoids blood and guts as thoroughly as it avoids so much else. In the film, people hit by bombs die discreetly, with no unseemly dismemberment.

We should be reminded here of John Davis' eyewitness account of what happened when dive bombers hit a hospital ship. Jonathan Raban (2017), whose father was at Dunkirk, describes the film caustically as 'the best action movie ever made' and references the Dunkirk scene in Joe Wright's *Atonement*, a film not primarily about the Dunkirk evacuation or indeed the Second World War, as a better rendition of the agony of what occurred at Dunkirk. In that film, as three British soldiers have their first sight of the chaos of the beach one, who happens to be black – there are no people of colour in Nolan's film as there are none in the English mythic community – says: 'Fuck me, it's like something out of the Bible.' Raban (2017) writes that after the war 'the survivors of Dunkirk would almost all liken it to Hell.' If *Atonement*'s extraordinary over-five minute tracking shot of the Dunkirk beach is Dunkirk as a vision of hell, then *Dunkirk's* representation is Dunkirk as a war version of heaven.

The expression of the traumatising experience is always modulated. In the utterly contrasting representations of the Dunkirk beach we have the traumatic binary, the sanitised, acceptable version and the horrific, terror-based version. Raban describes Wright's version as surreal signalling the traumatic inflection. It is, of course, the

sanitised version, which offers victory from the jaws of defeat and calms the traumatic anxiety by showing the Nazis failing in their attempt to destroy the British army and clear the way for invasion, which audiences want. Brendan Hodges (2017)recognises the dream quality of *Dunkirk* which is founded in the film's management of trauma. He describes the film as an 'eldrich masterpiece' and writes: '*Dunkirk* can even feel more otherworldly (or even science fiction) than [Nolan's previous film] *Interstellar*. … Gunfire hits like the cracked whips of hell, aerial battle sequences nearly induct vertigo across surreal alien skies, and the English Channel doubles as a black hole beneath the sea.' All these nightmare aspects seek to make the traumatic representation more 'realistic' to a British audience; to suppress the traumatising reality of the memory of Dunkirk and reinforce the myth.

The fear of invasion was used a lot by politicians campaigning for Leave. Boris Johnson published a biography of Churchill in 2014. In it he outlines what he claims would have happened if the Nazis had successfully occupied Britain:

> Hitler's Operation Sea Lion was a project not just of invasion but of subjugation. … The Nazis had already drawn up a blacklist of British figures who were known to be particularly anti-Nazi, who would presumably have been imprisoned or shot, and at one stage Himmler proposed killing or enslaving 80 percent of the British population. (p. 29).

For Johnson, at the heart of Churchill's greatness was his refusal of any form of appeasement with Hitler. Had such a deal been done in 1940: 'then there would have been no liberation of the continent. The country would not have been a haven of resistance, but a gloomy client state of an infernal Nazi EU' (2014, p. 30). Here we see Johnson implicating the European Union in the Nazi project and generating fear of the European Union by its association with what might have taken place in England if the the country had been successfully invaded by the Nazis. Johnson's image of the European, and British, future if Churchill had come to terms with Hitler rather than pursuing the war is part of the genre of invasion literature discussed earlier. In the post-Second World War period the genre has been focused on alternate realities founded in the successful Nazi invasion of Britain. The books are a repeated acting-out of the invasion fear trauma. They start with C S Forester's *If Hitler Had Invaded England*, published in 1960. The list includes Archie Roy's *All Evil Shed Away*, published in 1970 in which Churchill is assassinated and, what is often regarded as the best of the genre, Len Deighton's *SS-GB* a detective story set in 1941 after a successful German invasion. It was made into a television series shown on the BBC in 2017, after the Brexit referendum. However, perhaps the most powerful is Norman Longmate's *If Britain Had Fallen: the real Nazio ccupation plans*, published in 1972. The first four chapters are factual, based on the plans for Operation Sea Lion. The following thirteen chapters describe in a non-fictional way what would have happened during the invasion and occupation. Longmate's book was republished in 2012.

In the referendum campaign Johnson often compared the European Union to Hitler's project. There is, for example, an article by Tim Ross (2016) in *The Telegraph* on 15 May 2016 'Boris Johnson: the EU wants a superstate just as Hitler did'. However, Johnson was by no means alone in making comparisons with the Nazis. In 2017 Julia Rampen compiled a list for *The New Statesman* of what she called 'The 4 most unfortunate Nazi-EU comparisons made by Brexiteers.' First on her list was Gove comparing

economic experts to Nazi scientists. Second was a placard for the Leave campaign which read: 'Halt Ze German Advance. Vote Leave.' Here again we have the cod German made familiar in the United Kingdom in the war comic books discussed earlier. The connection to the war and possible invasion is easily made. Rampen (2017) also includes Johnson claiming that the European Union shares the same aims as Hitler. Finally, she has UKIP candidate Kim Rose quoting from Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* during the election campaign in 2015 when he stood for the seat of Southampton Itchen. When challenged Rose explained: 'My dad's mother was Jewish. Hitler was evil. I'm just saying the EU is evil as well' (Rampen, 2017). Here, in an extraordinary rhetorical move, Rose alludes to the Holocaust through the claim that his grandmother was Jewish in order to argue that he was equating Hitler as evil with the European Union as evil. It should be added that the Brexiteers were not the only ones to reference the Nazis, though they did so far more than the Remainers. Cultural trauma affects everybody in a culture. The ardent Remainer Thom Yorke, the main songwriter and lead singer of Radiohead, addressed Theresa May in 2019: 'nobody voted for you to bring into question the lives of millions of Europeans in this country as a bargaining tool, in so doing causing immense distress and suffering, an action worthy of the early days of the third Reich.'

Conclusion

In 1975 almost two thirds of those who voted wanted the United Kingdom to stay in the Common Market. The only areas where there was a majority vote to exit were some of the outer islands of Scotland, Shetland and the Western Isles. As I noted earlier, in the early 1970s Britain had serious economic problems which had resulted in a high unemployment rate. Immigration was not an issue during the referendum campaign. However, the Second World War was a constant theme. The referendum was held thirty years after the end of that war. Many voters of around fifty and over had served in the armed forces and anybody over thirty had lived through the war as either a child or an adult. Their response was to see the integration of the United Kingdom into European community as a way to avoid war. The posters for the campaign to stay in the Common Market make this very clear: '"Nationalism kills", one poster declared. "No More Civil Wars," said another. And yet another reminded voters that "Forty million people died in two wars this century. Better lose a little national sovereignty than a son or a daughter"' (Saunders, 2019). As is clear from the 'Forty million died … ' tag, the revulsion at the war was still so great that it was considered acceptable to lose some sovereignty rather than face the possibility of another war. The poster that stated 'Nationalism kills' was reminding people of the ideology of Nazi Germany without stating this openly.

The integration of the countries of Europe, including the United Kingdom, was not a new idea. Churchill himself had championed it. In a speech at the University of Zurich in September 1946 Churchill (1946) said: 'If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance, there would be no limit to the happiness, to the prosperity and glory which its three or four hundred million people would enjoy.' He went on to advocate 'a kind of United States of Europe.' The expansionist nationalism of unnamed Nazi Germany was contrasted with a voluntary integration of equals. The memory of the fear of invasion was repressed and the trauma of the war was manifested in

a preparedness to give up some sovereignty for the guarantee of a future without war in Europe, civil war as another poster put it.

Dad's Army went to air in July 1968. The first episode, titled 'The Man and the Hour', starts with a prologue. Mainwaring is introduced by his old second in command Wilson at an I'm Backing Britain meeting in Walmington-on-Sea where he is the guest of honour. Mainwaring is now an alderman. Those present are many of his old platoon including Pike, Walker and Frazer. Mainwaring starts by saying he has always backed Britain. In 1940, he reminds them, we all backed Britain. The I'm Backing Britain campaign was started in late 1967 by five secretaries working for Colt Ventilation and Heating. The campaign, which asked workers to work an extra half an hour a week without pay to help the British economy, became popular in early 1968. It was patriotic and explicitly nationalistic. Lapel badges and t-shirts conspicuously displayed the Union Jack. The campaign became linked with a claim about Britain's resolve in the face of adversity during the Second World War. Cecil Day-Lewis, the recently appointed Poet Laureate, wrote a poem commissioned by the *Daily Mail* celebrating the campaign. Published on 5 January 1968 Day-Lewis drew a direct comparison between the fighting spirit exhibited by those who suffered the blitz and those now backing Britain. With this prologue the show's writers, Jimmy Perry and David Croft, sought to avert any criticism of *Dad's Army* that might suggest the humour made light of Britain's situation in the war, and of those in the Home Guard who mobilised to defend the country.

Dad's Army began being broadcast seven years before the 1975 referendum. Its first run finished in 1977. The show played to the key British anxieties I have outlined in this article; invasion, occupation, sovereignty. Where the 1975 referendum debate acknowledged the awfulness of the Second World War and emphasised integration, *Dad's Army* was a part of the culturally traumatic repetition of the war. We have already seen Rees-Mogg's admiration for Captain Mainwaring. In the 2016 referendum debate this repetition dominated the Leave campaign's arguments, arguments about protecting 'England''s sovereignty, defending the country against occupation by the European Union, and 'invasion' by citizens of other member countries. The emotive power of these arguments, especially backed by references to Nazis and Hitler, came from the unresolved cultural trauma of the Second World War for those identifying as English.

Notes

1. Priest is adamant the book is not racist. In the forward to the 2011 revised version he writes that one reason he revised it was because, 'I did not like being lined up with racists' (p. 5).
2. It is highly likely that all the high profile Brexiteers, and David Cameron, had a history education based on the turn of the century linear curriculum with key people and events, such as William the Conqueror and the Battle of Hastings. Cameron (born 1966) was educated at Eton, as was Johnson (born 1964) and Rees-Mogg (born 1969). Gove (born 1967) was educated at Robert Gordon College in Edinburgh. Nigel Farage (born 1964) went to Dulwich College.
3. As it happens, England lost the match on penalties 6–5.

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